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Ernest Baylor

He wields a sketch pencil as mightily as his community activism

Margaret Martin / The Times

Posted on January 26, 2003



Jessica Leigh

Louisiana State Rep. Ernest Baylor Jr. is not only a legislator but an artist as well. He has sketched people's portraits since first grade and keeps a pencil with him always.

State Rep. Ernest Baylor Jr. has sketched portraits since he was a young child.

Fellow students in 81st Street Elementary School.

Community leaders who gathered at the Hollywood Avenue Stock Exchange in its heyday.

Speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives.

Last week the floor of his Hollywood office was filled with portraits he had gathered from around the country for an exhibit at Louisiana State Exhibit Museum.

A Feb. 2 reception for Baylor opens the monthlong show.

Baylor, 53, thinks the art exhibit will be of interest to people because it is a part of him nobody knows.

"People know me as a community activist ... a fighter in the Civil Rights movement. Nobody knows I can look at them and visualize them mentally and put them down on a sheet of paper so they'll have something to pass on to their family members," said Baylor. "This is a part of Ernest that is really not known."

You never know when Baylor, 53, will sketch. He always carries a pencil and finds himself drawing or doodling when there is free time.

"Art has always been in my structure, in my cells, in my body," he said.

He majored in art education at Southern University-Baton Rouge.

He yearned to be an artist.

But he is a realist too.

It is difficult to make a living full time as an artist.

He tried in the 1970s when he opened a gallery on Milam Street.

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"People liked my work, but I couldn't support myself and my family," said Baylor.

Through the years, he has taught school, served as a policeman and worked for a social services agency that dealt with the elderly.

So art became recreational and therapeutic.

He works on commission and prices range from \$3,000 to \$5,000.

Henry Price, supervisor of art for Caddo School system, an old friend of Baylor, feels he is truly gifted.

"He takes a conventional approach, but his personal technique is to use a combination of color and black and white," said Price.

Although Baylor works in several mediums, materials of choice are Ebony pencil, charcoal or pastel.

"Because of the simplicity of just getting a piece of paper in your hand and a pencil or charcoal, I really find myself leaning toward them," he said.

And although, Baylor is adept in varied renderings - a pencil sketch of a pelican, an oil of a New Orleans street scene - his speciality is portraits.

For Baylor, the fascination of a person lies in his or her face.

"Shape of the face. Wrinkles. And specifically the eyes. The eyes are the windows of the soul," said Baylor.

Some of his favorite portraits are charcoals of patrons who gathered at Sam Green's Hollywood Avenue Stock Exchange when it was in its mid-1980s heyday.

"Everyone came to the Stock Exchange. It was the 'in' place to go and socialize. People from all ranges of society came in. People who worked for the city. Owned their own businesses. Elected officials. Moms and dads. It was a nice atmosphere to be in and everybody gravitated to it," said Baylor.

Baylor did, too.

Green paid him to capture the regulars in charcoal portraits encased in simple wood frames. "It was a marketing tool. It gave something back to the patrons and brought others in to see them," said Baylor.

There is a young state Sen. Greg Tarver and his brother, older, very serious Leon Tarver, now president of the Southern University System.

There is a pixieish waitress wearing a jaunty bow tie, dangly earrings, a smile and a twinkle in her eye. "I remember she was always happy and ready to serve," said Baylor.

Caddo Parish Commissioner Carl Pierson is larger than life with his trademark grin, glasses and wearing a golf hat.

Another is 'Leo,' who worked security for Delta Airlines. "I like his big hat and glasses. His suit. He is smiling. There is character in his face and his eyes, the intensity of his eyes, like he is saying, 'I'm here. I've had life experiences.' And I like his 'Troop' cap. I like the way the portrait jelled and says who and what he was," said Baylor.

Baylor points to another portrait, a woman who was employed at the Stock Exchange. Baylor admires her face and its seriousness, the gradation of color in her hair, with no attempt to hide her gray and the way she cropped it.

"There is a lot of history. She is gracefully growing old, mature," said Baylor.

More recent pencil portraits portray Speaker of the House Charlie Dewitt and the late state Rep. Everett Doerge.

Baylor drew Dewitt during an intense debate in the House, capturing him seated, with his hand covering his chin, his blue eyes concentrating on the matter at hand. From the portrait, you get the feeling that Dewitt is totally absorbed in whatever is being said at that moment.

Baylor presented it to him during a heated debate over a bill. "I asked for personal privilege and sprung it on him."

"He was shocked," said Baylor.

"He said, 'Hell, Ernest, I didn't know you were an artist,'" said Baylor.

Dewitt hung it outside his office in the capitol.

Doerge's wife, Jean, now a state rep, was so impressed she asked Baylor to do one of her husband, the late former state Rep. Everett Doerge.

Some of Baylor's portraits are departures from more simple charcoals and pencils.

Unity in the Nineties combines portraits of civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King in one work of art, two men who took different routes in the fight for equality, said Baylor.

Baylor is formally trained, but he also took some lessons from the street.

When he was off from his teaching job in St. Charles Parish, he'd slip down to New Orleans' Jackson Square where he mingled with street artists and sketched portraits of people from around the world for \$3 to \$5.

And through the Jackson Square experience, Baylor developed his own style.

"Just being involved with those artists, I mastered my trade as far as portrait art. My love is people and capturing them in one dimension, but developing a three-dimensional quality," said Baylor.

If he were describing himself to someone who has never met him, Baylor would tell them how energetic he is and how laid back and how he is able to work within a group. (Something state Rep. Wayne Waddell says makes Baylor successful in the legislature.)

"I like to see progress. You can't change things fast enough for me. I like to see change now," Baylor said.

Being in the legislator helps him make changes.

Baylor has been a legislator eight years. He is vice president of the Municipal Parochial and Cultural Affairs Committee and member of the Ways and Means Committee and Insurance Committee.

He is proud of his record there, but talks specifically about two bills he helped pass.

Act 269, an emergency relief bill, gives time to those 150 percent below the poverty level in dealing with high electric bills in time of stress - like the ice storm of 2000.

Another bill prevents identity theft through sale of Social Security numbers of public school teachers and public employees.

Waddell finds fellow legislator Baylor a man of vision and humility. "He serves his constituents well."

He is easy to deal with because he is always up front about matters, said Waddell. "If

he can or can't vote for something, he'll tell you and stands by his word. He never wavers," said Waddell.

Baylor has long been a community activist.

He helped get oil and dirt streets in Cedar Grove replaced, and supported African-American leaders in their bid for elections and a multimillion dollar SPAR bond election in the 1990s, part of which went to upgrade Cedar Grove's A.B. Palmer Park.

He brought attention to the Solo Hood in the '70s, an area back of the Spring Lake area that was in the city, but still had outhouses.

Attorney S.P. Price knows him as a close friend since they were students at Southern University-

Baton Rouge.

"He is a very personal individual, a very caring and responsible individual. If he tells you he is going to do something, he does it," said Price.

"When my father passed away in 1996, was a very low point in my life. Ernest was there for me during my personal grieving and his family was there," said Price.

Baylor was born via a midwife and raised at 621 East 70th in Cedar Grove, one of 10 children born to Ernest Baylor Sr. and the late Pearl McKinney Baylor. His mother stayed at home to raise the children and his father drove a truck 35 years for Allen Millwork.

The Baylors instilled in all of their children the importance of higher education.

"They told us that was something nobody could take away from you," Baylor said.

If you go

WHAT: Exhibit of work by state Rep. Ernest Baylor Jr.

WHEN: Opening reception, 2 to 4 p.m. Feb. 2. Exhibit runs through Feb. 28.

WHERE: State Exhibit Museum, 3015 Greenwood Road.

RECEPTION ADMISSION: free.

Closeup

HIS FAMILY: Wife Shirley Guiden Baylor and two daughters, Daphne Lynette Dean of Shreveport, and Demetra LaTonya Baylor, graduate student at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y.

WHAT HE DRIVES: A black and white 1996 Nissen Pathfinder.

ENTREE HE'D CHOOSE FOR HIS LAST MEAL: "My wife makes a dish and calls it taco soup. It is ground meat and pinto beans and spices and it is scrumptious."

FAVORITE JUNK FOOD: "Quarterpounder with cheese."

WHO HE WOULD INVITE TO HIS FANTASY DINNER: "Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X."

IF A MOVIE WAS MADE OF HIS LIFE, WHO WOULD PLAY HIM: "Denzel Washington."

WAS MOM'S BEST ADVICE: "To get a good education. Put God first. Go after your dreams."

ADVICE HE'D GIVE TO A GROUP OF 16-YEAR-OLDS: "Be educationally sound ... Strive to be the best you can. Don't always be involved with the crowd."

HIS BEST ASSET: "I work well with people for an end result for positive change."

HIS WORST HABIT: He's not saying.

WHAT HE WOULD ATTEMPT TO DO IF HE KNEW HE COULD NOT FAIL: "Eradicate racism."

THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE FACING THE WORLD TODAY: "Hunger."

PAINTER HE ADMIRES THE MOST: "Cezanne. A Renaissance painter who went against the Old Masters."

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